

Alland. The Artistic Animal: An Inquiry into the Biological Roots of Art.

Author's Response

Flora S. Kaplan's review of my book *The Artistic Animal* in *Studies* [5(2):132-135] is so full of distortions, misreadings, and errors that I cannot let it go unanswered. It should be as ludicrous to others as it is painful to me to equate my work on art with sociobiology, yet I stand accused by Professor Kaplan of having written a sociobiological explanation of artistic behavior. Clearly Professor Kaplan is unable to distinguish between attempts to investigate the biological roots of specific *cultural* behaviors and sociobiology, which offers biological explanations not only of origins but of *differences* in behavior among contemporary individuals and social groups. Furthermore, sociobiologists claim to find specific continuities between what they pretend is genetically based instinctive behavior in lower animals and analogous behavior in humans. In my book I am careful to distinguish between the behavior of lower animals as it might relate to the emergence of artistic behavior in humans and artistic behavior *per se*. For example, on page 24 I say: "Not even a hint of it [artistic behavior] occurs in the natural behavior of other species." And, as I point out, my major argument about the emergence of art as a uniquely human capacity is that in the biological sense artistic behavior is not adaptive and thus not a product of selection. Instead I suggest that it is an artifact of other adaptive traits, some of which occur in nonhumans.

Although I list a series of traits that are undoubtedly adaptive in any environment for most if not all primates (play and exploratory behavior, fine-grain perceptual discrimination and good memory storage, sensitivity to certain kinds of form or gestalts in the environment), I reserve one trait for the human species alone: This is what I call *transformation-representation*. It is based on the ability of humans to symbol and use metaphor, but its content is purely cultural. Without this trait art as such cannot exist, and it is for this reason that it is useless to talk about artistic behavior in lower animals. As I say in the book, "It is for these reasons that art, as part of culture, can only be understood from the point of view of culture. If art has a strong biological base, that base is manifested only in the context of a particular history. Art does not stand alone as a biological process, because one of its most important aspects, *transformation-representation*, takes its content from the specific moment. Art and transformation-representation are only realizable historically" (pp. 120-121).

I do not believe nor do I claim that artistic behavior is in any way instinctive. I do believe that art as part of sym-

bolic behavior of a special and uniquely human kind has its roots in human evolution. I state clearly in the book, and in several places, that the art of any particular culture at any particular historical period is purely a cultural question. My statement on page xi that "genetic potentialities, built into our brains, can generate artistic behavior in the sense of both creation and appreciation" has been seized upon by Kaplan and can only be misunderstood when quoted out of context, for I go on to say in the next sentence: "This exclusively human pattern determines an *infinite* space within which individual creativity can achieve its full expression."

I never extrapolate from, nor do I believe that one can extrapolate from, a hereditary predisposition "to genes and from genes to specific behavior as complex and varied as expressive behavior in the visual arts, music, dance, theatre, and ritual" (Kaplan 1977:132). Her misunderstanding of my point of view is blatant when she cites pages 32 and 63 of my book as evidence for the above interpretation. On page 32, I stress that lower animals that either respond to form (not art) or play with form *are in no way* engaging in artistic behavior. On that page I say in an italicized sentence, "*painting apes are not artists.*" Kaplan also questions my discussion of ape "painting" on the ground that apes are not our ancestors (which, of course, they are not) and because their painting may simply result from pleasurable motor activities. I agree that it is dangerous to extrapolate from apes to humans, but as close genetic relatives they can tell us something about primate capacities in general, especially when these are shared capacities. As for pleasure in motor activity, I can only agree that this is probably the major, if not the only, reason apes "paint," but one ingredient of artistic pleasure is just that: motor pleasure. Clearly, however, the illustration in my book of Nim Chimsky's copy of a square, a circle, and a triangle is more than simple motor pleasure, if less than art.

On page 63 of *The Artistic Animal* my discussion of brain function refers specifically to possible right- versus left-hemisphere control of visual art and music. I am surprised that Kaplan finds these suggestions unsupported by the evidence, since there is a large literature on lateralization. I also cite Howard Gardner's book *The Shattered Mind* (Knopf, 1975) to indicate certain differences between human linguistic behavior which is transformative and communication (not language) in lower animals. Gardner points out that damage to the right hemisphere may leave ordinary syntax and vocabulary intact but disturb the ability of humans to use and understand metaphor. Furthermore, while I do not attempt to locate artistic behavior in a specific part of the brain (I fully agree with Kaplan that such behavior is complex and must be diffuse), we do know that certain perceptual inputs (such as line angles) are decoded not only in particular regions of the brain, but in specific cells! Fine-grain perceptual discrimination is *one* of the pre-

adaptations for artistic behavior that I cite in my book, and this kind of perception *is* closely linked to the kind of specific cell activity noted here.

Professor Kaplan suffers from that disease of scholarship known as reference mongering. She cites a long string of references to indicate that "The present study of hominid evolution encompasses a series of competing models and interpretations based on the same fossil record: seed-eaters as opposed to hunters as opposed to hunters and scavengers" (Kaplan 1977:132). I do not deny the complex issues Kaplan raises, but they have absolutely nothing to do with the arguments in my book, since I make no attempt to discuss the stages of human evolution as they apply to the emergence of art. Rather I point out that, whatever the route taken, the traits that are pre-adaptations for artistic behavior must have occurred for human evolution to have occurred as it did, and for art to have emerged as a specifically human trait. The adaptations I dwell on fit *all* the models of human evolution, and they are not in any way related to specific stages of that evolution.

The goals of anthropology are to explain both the similarities and differences that occur among human groups. Most anthropologists concentrate on the differences. My book, in the tradition of searching for what is known as the *psychic unity of humankind*, attempts to understand the basis for one important area of similarity: the capacity for artistic behavior. Therefore, it is outrageous to accuse me of ignoring differences: "These kinds of differences and much ethnographic detail are lost in studies which focus on the underlying similarities" (Kaplan 1977:133). Who can deny this statement? But a study of differences, as wide as they are and as important as they are (as I myself point out), will never yield information on what we have in common as a species. Kaplan demands that I play the wrong game according to *her* rules!

The same problem arises when Kaplan accuses me of circular reasoning. " 'Good form' produces an aesthetic response in 'sensitive individuals.' " This is one of the many examples of circular reasoning found in the book: aesthetic response is defined by the very individuals who respond to aesthetics, and good form is later distinguished from bad form by these same sensitive individuals" (Kaplan 1977:134). My statement is based on empirical findings and not on definitions. When random subjects in different cultures are asked to make aesthetic judgments from the same sample of art, there is high agreement *within* cultures but no significant agreement *between* cultures. When the same samples are shown to people interested and involved in art, the agreement becomes significant *between* cultures even when the subjects have no familiarity with the art used in the experiment. What we are apparently getting at here is response to "good form," *an* element (not the only one; I speak of convention and structure as well) in art appreciation.

In an attempt to bury me under her own erudition Kaplan indulges in a long exegesis of an erased de Kooning by Robert Rauschenberg and criticizes my equating it with subway graffiti. Everything she says about the Rauschenberg work is true. It does, as she states, have its *art history*. Kaplan is also correct when she points out that subway graffiti are not action paintings, at least not in the sense that the term has meaning in recent modern art. But in all that rhetoric Kaplan totally loses sight of the simple point I was trying to make in an introductory chapter. The point of Chapter I in *The Artistic Animal* is merely to convince those who need convincing that the net of art is spread wide and goes beyond what many laymen consider art to be. When I said that subway graffiti are an example of life imitating art (a very small point in the book, by the way), I meant that the erased de Kooning and erased subway graffiti share certain *formal* elements that exist apart from art history and interpretation. The more one becomes open to art in life, the more one can make the transformations necessary to (in a real sense) create one's own art. Wrapped buildings (wrapped in the winter to keep construction workers out of the cold) remind me of Cristo's work, even though I know (but how many laymen know?) that all of Cristo's wrappings have both aesthetic and political points to make. The whole nature of the game of art is such that *formally* similar phenomena can produce transformative reverberations of an aesthetic sort when connections are made between them. For me, at least, to say that "life imitates art" is to say that art often provides a means for seeing the mundane in new, exciting, and aesthetic ways.

Also, for the record, when I say that subway graffiti are action paintings, I mean this in the same sense as their artists do: they tell me that they enjoy seeing their graffiti speed through the city. The actual graffiti *are* planned in advance, but their artistic life is enhanced by the motion of the subway cars that bear them.

Alexander Alland

Reviewer's Reply

Let me begin my reply to Alland's emotional and wild-swinging attacks in response to my review of his book, *The Artistic Animal*, by saying that such attacks do not elevate either the discussion or his stature. I might add that it is a little difficult, and even humorous, to take seriously his attempt, in a parting attack, to strike a humble pose. He is, after all, the author who has attempted to give us an illustrated, worldwide, cross-cultural, and evolutionary theory of the origins of art in some 140 pages.

I can appreciate Alland's distress if he thinks he is being classed as a sociobiologist. He obviously sees himself on the side of culture, and as a humanist. The review referred only to the book's potential for extending the "sociobiological debate," into areas of expressive culture. Nowhere in the review did I suggest that Alland consciously supports sociobiology. What is obvious, like it or not, is that the book itself will be identified, certainly in the public mind, with a sociobiological approach, presenting as it does an organic, genetic, and evolutionary basis for the origins of art. Here I would remind readers that the subtitle of this popular paperback is *An Inquiry into the Biological Roots of Art*. Note, too, that the cover illustration is a painter's palette with the head of a "gorilla" (quotes mine) substituted at one end for a color, as a kind of subtle visual surprise. It is a surprise which shows very graphically the kind of linkage which I have pointed to in my review, and which is pointed at the public. Alland could have indicated in his reply that he had, perhaps, argued with his publishers and regretted any confusion caused by the subtitle and choice of cover, but he does not. The association set in motion by the book's title, subtitle, and cover are carried forward immediately in the opening paragraph of the preface, which asserts the existence of "genetic potentialities, built into our brains" (regardless of the stated "infinite space" they are supposed to create) (p. xi).

Alland makes a distinction between investigating the biological roots of specific cultural behaviors and biological explanations by sociobiologists of origins and differences among contemporary individuals and social groups; and he oversimplifies the sociobiological approach, which does not exclude culture. In fact, if we listen to Wilson's remarks in the course of a debate on sociobiology with Marvin Harris, much of what he says is compatible with what Alland is saying through much of his book. That is not to say this makes Alland a sociobiologist; it simply means that his book and its implications lend support to this approach.

Wilson sees sociobiology as concerned with social behavior; although "it is not a specific theory about human behavior . . . it allows for any of a wide array of possibilities" (*The New York Times*:18E, p. 3). Both Wilson and Harris agree, generally, that human behavior is on a genetic leash. It appears in their discussion that it is Harris, the anthropologist, who wishes to focus on the study of differences and Wilson, the sociobiologist, who is interested in similarities. But this is as much a matter of personal choice as epistemology, not inherent in the respective disciplines.

Wilson freely admits that from the biological point of view "the human being is unique; that culture is overriding, and that therefore with reference to sociobiological theory the human species is a wild card," and he leaves the question open to empirical investigation. What is interesting about Wilson's remarks in this debate are his convictions about the hard understructure in the form of

emotional predisposition in learning rules that channel cultural evolution and make biological investigation well worthwhile.

Wilson feels that human beings are on a dual track of evolution with their fastest track being cultural evolution; and yet they have gotten up to this point by conventional genetic evolution. These statements by the leading proponent of sociobiology, including his emphasis on the existence of "programmed learning rules" and "understructure," do not seem wildly apart from Alland's blend of biology and culture, structure, and genetic blueprints. Even Harris, not noted for taking mild positions, sees the interrelationship between their differences mainly in terms of emphasis and the focus they would give to research efforts.

I have simply called attention to the implications contained in *The Artistic Animal* and made them explicit. It seems Alland is shocked by this. I would urge him then to reread his book as carefully as I have, several times, and to consider the implications of what he writes before release and not complain about them afterward. Alland wants to have it both ways, and all ways: biology and culture—separate but together, rooted but apart, adaptive but then nonadaptive. Is it that Alland means to say that art is symbolic behavior?

The review I wrote focused on the book as written, not on the intent of the author. I was careful to point out on the very first page that the reader's view of the book will "depend on your theoretical preference for dealing with macroanalysis or microanalysis, for similarities or differences in human behavior" (p. 132). Alland declares I wanted him to write it my way, to have been concerned with differences, not similarities. Not so. The main problems with this book come from contradictory concepts and circular definitions that preclude meaningful *macroanalysis*. True, Alland includes culture, history, ecology, game theory, biology, and genetics in the origins of art. But in not telling us what, where, how, and why—in including everything so as not to be found wanting in anything—Alland ends by giving us nothing to measure, weigh, or test empirically or logically. My criticisms are directed not to the fact that he fails to deal with "differences" but that he does not enable us to understand much about "similarities" either.

Alland misinterprets the seriousness with which I examined his biological claims for art, calling it "reference mongering," a presumably perjorative description. However, in his response he hastens to assure everyone that he has read most of the same sources. It seems obvious in this context that the converse of such "mongering" is nonmongering, or sloppy scholarship. I gave only a few examples of the latter from his book in my review (p. 135). I did not dwell on them since the book was directed to a general audience. Nonetheless, the half-references and nonreferencing of quotes and sources, and the absence of translations of foreign-language passages, will

be frustrating for those who read his book. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to tell what Alland has read and used in the book from the inadequate bibliography provided, sparsity of notes, and other such problems. His response to my review will be useful for filling these gaps in the book.

In discussing my remarks on the graffiti/de Kooning-Rauschenberg analogy, Alland again assures us that he has read all the same sources and knows the same things I do. In fact he supports my points about graffiti and their makers in all regards except in the conclusions drawn. He then attempts to extend the discussion in his response to the review by saying it is the "formal principles" which underlie both the erased subway car and the erased de Kooning drawing that are alike. Here he repeats his original errors in a new form. And I confess I am at a loss even to guess what formal principles he could possibly mean or to detect them in such disparate subject matter, materials, and contexts.

In his closing comments on graffiti as "action painting," after acknowledging my points that graffiti are pre-planned and outside the mainstream of art historical tradition, he insists that their motion on subway cars speeding by make them "action painting." While the young men who paint graffiti unquestionably enjoy seeing their handiwork speed by, it does not alter the facts that for the New York action painters it was the *act* of painting itself which engaged them; it was not the end product or the speed with which it was perceived, by them or anyone else. If Alland sees a connection between the two, it must remain his own form of myopia: the analogy remains superficial at best.

Similar errors recur in his protest of my characterization of his definition of "good form" as circular. At the very least he begs the question on this notion, which is central to his thesis, when he writes, "My statement is based on empirical findings and not on definitions" (p. 5). To say that we have the answers before the question is framed is to invite intellectual confusion.

Art, like "good form," is everywhere, according to Alland, its formal principles and aesthetic appeal just waiting to be discovered in natural and manmade phenomena by "sensitive individuals." He modestly offers himself as a model of such sensitivity, illustrating his response with an example of plastic-enclosed buildings on a construction site in bad weather. These, he notes, remind him of the "wrapped buildings" of Cristo: Such "formally similar phenomena can produce transformative reverberations of an aesthetic sort when connections are made between them." Cristo's work serves as an example of art enriching the "mundane," though Alland confides that few laymen know that Cristo's wrappings have "aesthetic and political points to make." Here we go again. Though I am glad that Cristo has added to Alland's heightened sensitivity in the vicinity of construction sites in bad weather—is that the point of art? Is it not the aesthetic and political points Cristo makes in the act of

wrapping? Western and other literary traditions have been filled with recognition of the capacity to appreciate nature and other phenomena unmodified by artists. Jane Goodall long ago observed that even chimpanzees enjoyed the sunset.

Alland does in the Cristo example what he did in the graffiti/de Kooning-Rauschenberg example; he obliterates the significance of the acts and their place in an art historical context. This is justified, apparently, because of undefined, but underlying formal principles, which escape most laymen though not sensitive individuals like himself.

In his response to my review, Alland gives a far more lucid and closely reasoned account of some of the ideas which underly *The Artistic Animal*. Regrettably, this account is not in the book. My basic criticisms stand: inadequate methods and data to support the theory proffered; theory which is incapable of generating testable hypotheses; generalizations and conclusions that exceed the data and theory.

Alland protests that his grand conception in the tradition of the psychic unity of mankind has been misinterpreted. The burden of proof, however, is on the author. It is Alland who chooses to put his grand conception on the psychic unity of mankind, the origins of art, its biological roots, evolutionary development, profusion, and cross-cultural expression from the paleolithic to airport and modern art—and everything in between, including theater, ritual, dance, and music—into a paperback designed for the general public, compressing and juxtaposing complex ideas which are not developed. As I originally noted in my review, a slight volume can succeed with a closely reasoned and elegant argument, which is difficult to achieve. Darwin, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss, to mention others who have been concerned with macroanalysis and theory, elaborated their grand conceptions, based on empirical data which they collected, in scholarly books of a length needed to develop cogent and convincing arguments. Perhaps, Alland will eventually favor us with such a volume.

I agree essentially with Alland that there is a predisposition for art in man, and that it is genetically based, being part of our evolutionary heritage. As I stated in the review, our differences concern the extent of the conclusions to be drawn at this time, and in the absence of much-needed empirical studies in biology and art.

Flora S. Kaplan